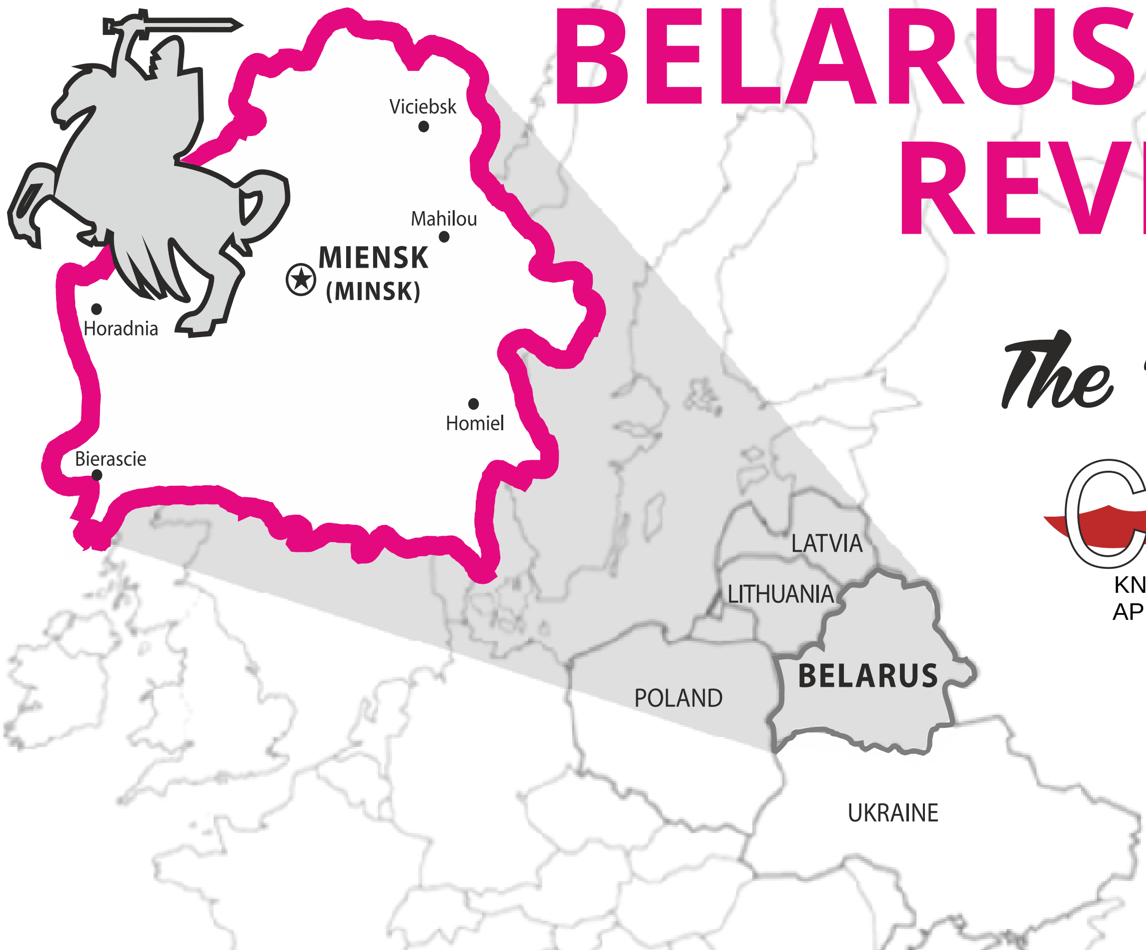
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THE ROMANIZATION OF BELARUSIAN: AN UNNECESSARY DUALISM

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THE ROMANIZATION OF BELARUSIAN: AN UNNECESARY DUALISM

KIRYL KASCIAN

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Belarusian state employs two different systems for the romanization of geographical and personal names.

Adopted in 2000 and revised in 2007, the romanization of geographical names is based on the historically-developed traditional Belarusian Roman script, known as *lacinka*. It is scientifically-based, linguistically sound, and since 2012 approved by the UNCSGN to serve as the international system for the romanization of Belarusian geographical names. The romanization system of Belarusian geographical names is unanimous and invariable with Belarusian as the source language. It is fully reversible and employs diacritic marks. This system is mandatory for all individuals, as well as private and public bodies.

The romanization of the personal names applied in Belarus is not reversible. An individual is entitled to choose how her/his name should be romanized from either Belarusian or Russian, though she/he is limited to the basic Roman letters and the apostrophe. In case the individual has not instructed the officials how she/he wishes to transliterate her/his name, the rules set down by the Instructions for the transliteration of personal names apply. These rules can be described as "Anglicization by default" based on the ICAO recommendations, Belarusian being the source language in such a case. Being mechanically imposed by the authorities in compliance with the ICAO norms, such an approach creates multiple options for the transliteration of personal names and is quite chaotic, since it neither contributes to uniformity and standardization, nor reflects historical traditions of the local language.

By extension, the state could be advised to extend the application of the national system of transliteration of geographical names to Belarusian personal names in order to achieve a standardized approach based on scientific principles and long-established historical traditions of the Belarusian language.

Currently, a massive ignorance of the two systems for romanization of geographical and personal names can be observed in the English versions of the official websites of Belarusian public bodies, state-run media and private companies. This view is determined by the lack of effective implementation and control mechanisms, as well as erroneous extension of Art. 17 of the Constitution to the principles of romanization of geographical and personal names.

In addition to effective measures within the country, a targeted involvement and promotion of correct standards for the romanization of Belarusian geographical and personal names is also needed abroad. This will help to overcome an unnecessary and rather subjective approach by the foreign media, experts and scholars who still romanize Belarusian names based on their personal choices and/or the self-assessed convenience of their prospective readers.

INTRODUCTION: PRACTICE OF TRANSLITERATION

Belarusian geographical and personal names often appear in news sources, analytical publications, as well as in official and tourist information. However, they lack consistency and uniformity from one publication or author to another. Actually, the aforementioned sources of information usually do not provide any additional explanation why they choose a particular form of spelling. Therefore, it seems reasonable to consult Belarus-focused individuals and collective academic monographs whose authors usually find some space to explain the transliteration used.

The available Belarus-related titles in the English language are quite diverse and cover different periods of the country's history. However, some authors depict only certain periods of Belarus' history of the 19th or 20th centuries. Quite often they use Russian or Polish variants of the Belarusian geographical names backing this choice according to the official status of these languages at that time. This approach seems rather logical, as there "is a difference between history and memory, a difference revealed by a careful study of names"[1] It is therefore important to focus on those works which at least partly deal with the post-Soviet independent Belarus.

Generally, the scholars who write about Belarus can be divided along the line of official Belarusian-Russian bilingualism. Thus, there are those scholars who opt for the Belarusian spelling and those who advocate usage of Russian in their works. This choice "is considered by many as a political statement".[2] Nevertheless, scholars use different logic in their decisions and sometimes explain it in the introductory parts of their works. Therefore, it seems useful to quote at least some of them.

Margarita Balmaceda, James Clem and Lisbeth Tarlow in their 2002 book opted for Belarusian, although stressed that "the use of Belarusian itself is difficult since there are competing orthographs which claim centrality and authenticity."[3]

David Marples, author of three books on Belarus[4], stresses that he tries to use native language versions of place and personal names which is important in the case of Belarus "because of the precarious position of the language in that state."[5]

Andrew Wilson in his *Belarus: the Last European Dictatorship* chose to use Belarusian spellings in order to emphasize Belarus' distinct history, although "transliterat[ing] the unique Belarusian letter 'ў' as 'w' rather than 'u', which is how it sounds and is hopefully clearer for the general reader".[6]

Grigory Ioffe prefers to transliterate Belarusian geographical names from Russian "[taking] guidance from the dominant language usage in the Republic of Belarus".[7]

Ann Lewis called the choice in favor of Russian she made as the editor of book on Belarus in 2002 "a matter of convenience" and further explained that where Belarusian names are familiar to non-specialists, it is usually in the Russian form, and the Russian versions of names are commonly used in academic writings about Belarus both in that country and in the West.[8]

The quotations of the scholars who write on Belarus lead to two conclusions. First, there is no consistency among scholars in using certain standard of transliteration. The choice in favor of either the Belarusian or the Russian language is often determined by the personal choice of the author and alleged convenience/familiarity of the prospective reader. Second, all arguments of the scholars refer to the issues of Belarusian identity and history, actual positioning of the language in the country or as political message, which is linked with the preference of certain transliteration.

Obviously, the status of Belarusian and Russian languages as state languages of the Republic of Belarus combined with the nation's Soviet past seems to be the main reason for the entire issue in question. However, none of the cited scholars have directly presented their choice through the prism of the Belarusian legislation on transliteration of geographical and personal names and the practice of its implementation.

APPLICABLE DEFINITIONS AND CATEGORIZATION

The need for the international standardization of geographical names throughout the world was acknowledged in 1959 by the UN Economic and Social Council (hereinforth: ECOSOC) and practically embodied in the activities of the UN Conferences on the Standardization of Geographical Names (hereinforth: UNCSGN) and the UN Group of Experts on Geographical Names (hereinforth: UNGEGN). The main principle of these activities is that each country decides for itself on "its own nationally standardized names through the creation of national names authorities or recognized administrative processes" which "reflect the languages and traditions of a country". [10] Consequently, "[f]or each non-Roman alphabet or script this will be through the adoption and use of a single scientifically-based romanization system".[11] In other words, in the case of the countries which use non-Roman writing systems the UNGEGN contributes to a scientifically-based uniformity of conversion of the geographical names to the Roman alphabet. This conversion to the Roman alphabet is referred to as romanization.

The Belarusian legislation does not directly employ the term "romanization" and instead applies a broader notion of "transliteration". Thus, the document which sets rules for writing Belarusian geographical names in Roman letters is entitled "Instructions for transliteration of geographical names in the Republic of Belarus to letters of the Roman alphabet" (hereinforth: Instructions for transliteration of geographical names).[12] However, since this document deals with the transliteration to the Roman alphabet, the notions "transliteration" and "romanization" are treated as interchangeable in this regard.

Thus, with regard to the Belarusian geographical names three major issues should be emphasized:

1. There is a universal body which regulates standardization of the geographical names on the scientific basis and in compliance with the domestic language rules and traditions;
2. Both domestically and internationally, the Belarusian language is viewed as the language which employs non-Roman or, more precisely, Cyrillic writing system;
3. The romanization standard of Belarusian should therefore be treated as a way of conversion of the Belarusian Cyrillic geographical names to the Roman alphabet.

The personal names of the Belarusian citizens and allegedly other Belarus-related historical and contemporary personalities are subject to different sets of rules. First, there is no universal body which standardizes their conversion to the Roman alphabet. Second, Belarusian personal names are also "transliterated" (i.e. converted from their Cyrillic original writing), according to rules enunciated in the "Instructions for transliteration of family and personal names of the citizens of the Republic of Belarus while including their personal data into the population register" (hereinforth: Instructions for transliteration of personal names). Third, the standards of the transliteration of the Belarusian personal names differ from those used for the the geographical names which is illustrated in the following table:

Table 1: A Comparison of the Romanization Systems of Belarusian Geographical and Personal Names According to the Norms of the Belarusian Domestic Law[13]

Letters of the Belarusian Cyrillic Alphabet and their combinations	Romanization of the Belarusian geographical names as required by the Instructions for transliteration of geographical names	Romanization of the Belarusian personal names as recommended by the Instructions for transliteration of personal names
А.а	A, a	A, a
Б, б	B, b	B, b
В. в	V, v	V, v
Г, г	H, h	G, g; Belarusian variant: H, h
Д, д	D, d	D, d
Е, е	Je, je (initially, after vowels, ʻ, ь and ў); ie (after consonants)	E, e (exception – Belarusian variant: ie (after consonants) and Je, je (initially, after vowels, ʻ, ь and ў)
Ё, ё	Jo, jo (initially, after vowels, ʻ, ь and ў); io (after consonants)	E, e (exception – Belarusian variant: io (after consonants) and Jo, jo (initially, after vowels, ʻ, ь and ў)
Ж, ж	Ž, ž	Zh, zh
З, з	Z, z	Z, z
І, і	I, i	I, i
Й, й	J, j	J, j
К, к	K, k	K, k
Л, л	L, l	L, l
М, м	M, m	M, m
Н, н	N, n	N, n
О, о	O, o	O, o
П, п	P, p	P, p
Р, р	R, r	R, r
С, с	S, s	S, s
Т, т	T, t	T, t
У, у	U, u	U, u
Ў, ў	Ŭ, ŭ	W, w
Ф, ф	F, f	F, f
Х, х	Ch, ch	Kh, kh
Ц, ц	C, c	Ts, ts
Ч, ч	Č, č	Ch, ch
Ш, ш	Š, š	Sh, sh
ь	´ (дзь – dź, зь – ź, ль – ĺ, нь – ń, сь – ś, ць – ś)	j + next vowel (the same principle applies to the letter "ъ" included into the Instructions)
Э, э	E, e	E, e
Ю, ю	Ju, ju (initially, after vowels, ʻ, ь and ў); iu (after consonants)	Iu, iu (exception – Belarusian variant: iu (after consonants) and Ju, ju (initially, after vowels,, ʻ, ь and ў)
Я, я	Ja, ja (initially, after vowels, ʻ, ь and ў); ia (after consonants)	Ia, ia (exception – Belarusian variant: ia (after consonants) and Ja, ja (initially, after vowels, ʻ, ь and ў)

PERSONAL NAMES: MECHANISMS OF APPLICATION

Adopted in 2008, the Instructions for transliteration of personal names is quite flexible with regard to its application. First, the Instructions establish that the use of the transliteration system of the Belarusian personal names is not required but recommended for the use. In other words, a citizen is entitled to transliterate her/his name into the Roman alphabet according to her/his personal preferences which could differ from the system established by the Instructions. Second, an individual can choose whether to romanize her/his personal name from the Belarusian or from the Russian language. Third, an individual is entitled to change the way of transliteration of her/his personal name but not more than once and this altered spelling of the personal name may also differ from the rules established by the Instructions.[14]

Hence, the Belarusian state provides its citizens with the opportunity to freely choose how their names should be romanized. However, in each case an individual cannot use diacritic symbols and is therefore limited to 26 basic letters of the Roman alphabet and the apostrophe. Moreover, if an individual has not provided the preferred way of transliteration of her/his personal name, it is done by the relevant authorities who transliterate it from the Belarusian variant of the person's name according to the rules established by the Instructions.[15]

At the same time, though the relevant Instructions for transliteration of personal names use the notion of "transliteration", the Application form for issuance of a passport of a citizen of the Republic of Belarus (known as Form No.1) uses the term "Roman transcription" (in Belarusian: *lacinskaja transkrypcyja*). The latter notion rather refers to

> a method of phonetic names conversion between different languages, in which the sounds of a source language are recorded in terms of a specific target language and its particular script, normally without recourse to additional diacritics.[16]

Moreover, transcription is "not normally a reversible process" which is "often only an approximation of the original pronunciation".[17]

Considering the conversion rules of the Belarusian personal names established by the Instructions for transliteration of personal names, it is possible to underline its main characteristics:

1. this system is not reversible;
2. it does not employ diacritic signs;
3. at least some specific letters (like ж, х, ч, ш) of a source language (either Belarusian or Russian) are recorded in terms of a specific target language which is English. The confirmation of this "Anglicization by default" approach (based on the rules of the International Civil Aviation Organization) can be found on the instructions provided by the Ministry of Internal Affairs .[18]

As for an individual's options, there are three major aspects which should be emphasized with regard to the transliteration of the Belarusian personal names to the letters of the Roman alphabet:

1. The Instructions provides citizens of Belarus with an opportunity to choose the way of transliteration using 26 characters of the basic Roman alphabet and the apostrophe. In other words, though not being able to use diacritic symbols, an individual can freely choose the way of transliteration of her/his name, either by following the rules recommended by the Instruction or by not taking them into account;
2. The state can step in only in the next stage, i.e. only if an individual has not instructed the

authorities how her/his name should be romanized. In this case, the primacy of the Belarusian language is acknowledged;

3. As a result of this approach, the application of the transliteration (though, in fact transcription) system established by the Instructions in each case does not necessarily provide the correct romanized spelling of the person's name. In other words, the only correct form of romanization of each individual's name can be found in her/his personal documents.

GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES: MECHANISMS OF APPLICATION

As mentioned above, the romanization system of the Belarusian geographical names significantly differs from that of personal names. It was adopted in 2000 and revised in 2007 following an expert examination by the UNGEGN. The Instructions apply only to the toponyms located within the borders of the Republic of Belarus. Being scientifically-based and "linguistically sound", in August 2012 the romanization system established by the Instructions was recommended by the Tenth United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names to serve as the international system for the romanization of the Belarusian geographical names.[19]

The national system of romanization reflects the traditions of the Belarusian language, as it is based on the historically-developed Roman script of the Belarusian language known as *lacinka*, which has a long-standing literary and journalistic tradition.[20] Thus, it is characterized by the usage of the diacritic symbols historically traditional for the Belarusian language and its reversibility. Additionally, Belarusian authorities emphasize similarities between the *lacinka*-based national standard of Belarus and the GOST standard used in Russia. At the same time, the divergence of these two systems is explained through "peculiarities in the toponymy of Belarus and differences in the Belarusian and Russian alphabets".[21] Moreover, the scope of application of the Instructions for transliteration of geographical names is mandatory for all, i.e.

> all ministries, national administrative bodies, institutions, enterprises and organizations, regardless of form of ownership, and for individual persons, including foreign persons, holding special permits to perform activities in the field of geographical names in the Republic of Belarus.[22]

The rules established by the Instructions are unanimous and invariable. Therefore, Belarusian geographical names are converted into the Roman script

- only from their correct Belarusian spelling and
- only according to the rules established by the Instructions.

Therefore, Belarus has one historically-developed and scientifically-based romanization standard for geographical names which has been adopted not only as a national standard but also as the international romanization system of the Belarusian geographical names.

ARE TWO DIFFERENT ROMANIZATION STANDARDS NECESSARY?

The analysis of two distinct romanization systems applicable in Belarus towards geographical and personal names demonstrate that they employ different principles of conversion of Belarusian names to the Roman script. The logical question is whether this dichotomy is necessary? If not, which standard should be applied?

On the one hand, prior to their adoption, both the Instructions for transliteration of personal names and the Instructions for transliteration of geographical names had been negotiated and agreed to by different public bodies of the Republic of Belarus. For the Instructions for translite-

ration of geographical names, these bodies were:

- State Commitee on Property (issuer of the Instructions)
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs,
- Ministry of Culture,
- Ministry of Internal Affairs,
- National Academy of Sciences.

In the case of the Instructions for transliteration of personal names, the public bodies concerned were:

- Ministry of Internal Affairs (which issued the Instructions),
- The Jakub Kolas and Janka Kupala Institute of Language and Literature at the National Academy of Sciences.

This list demonstrates that the adoption of the two romanization systems involved at least two of the same public bodies, namely the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the National Academy of Sciences.

On the other hand, while for the Instructions for transliteration of geographical names the status of the Russian language in the Republic of Belarus is totally irrelevant, the Instructions for transliteration of personal names consider Belarusian-Russian official bilingualism. In other words, while all the Belarusian geographical names must be romanized from the Belarusian language, in the case of the Belarusian personal names an individual may choose both the transliteration (though, actually the transcription) of the source language (either Belarusian or Russian) and the target language. The latter is deemed by default to be English according to the ICAO transcription rules, though it is not a requirement. Thus, citizens of the Republic of Belarus are provided with relative freedom of choice how to romanize their own names, being limited only by the 26 basic Roman letters and the apostrophe. At the same time, this limitation seems to create additional obstacles because of the irreversible nature of the *de facto* Anglicized transcription which Belarusian authorities by default apply towards personal names of their citizens. First, although English is becoming a language of universal communication, it has never had any historical presence in Belarus with regard to its impact on the literary standards and traditions of Belarus. Thus, Anglicization was chosen despite the fact that at least four Roman script languages have historical links with the development of the Belarusian language – Czech (its impact on the Belarusian *lacinka*), German, Latin and Polish. Second, in the overwhelming majority of cases, the "recommended" character of the Instructions creates multiple options for transliteration of the same family and/or given names. Therefore, it is not uncommon that for various reasons even close relatives with the same surnames have them differently romanized in their official documents. Third, when combined with the romanization system of geographical names, these different approaches become obvious. In other words, the romanization system of personal names which is currently used by the Belarusian authorities does not contribute to the uniformity and standardization because of its de facto chaotic approach. Moreover, being mechanically imposed by the authorities with the reference to the ICAO standards, the romanization system of personal names currently used in Belarus is neither scientifically-based, nor does it reflect the historical traditions of the local language(s). Therefore, it seems logical to extend the application of the national system of transliteration of geographical names to the Belarusian personal names in order to achieve a standardized approach based on scientific principles and long-established historical traditions of the languages traditionally present in Belarus. The

opportunity for an individual to choose the approach to the romanization of her/his personal name should therefore include such intentionally and historically accurate options.

IMPLEMENTATION: LACK OF CONTROL MECHANISMS

Despite their discrepancy and aforementioned shortcomings, both transliteration systems contain some general rules which are of key importance with regard to their implementation. Thus, as the Instructions for transliteration of geographical names prescribe,

1. the source language is always Belarusian,
2. the rules for transliteration are standardized as unanimous and invariable, and
3. this system of transliteration is mandatory for all individuals, as well as private companies and public bodies.

The Instructions for the transliteration of personal names

1. provide the room for the choice of transliteration, though limited to the basic Roman letters and the apostrophe, and
2. if an individual has not instructed the authorities how her/his personal name should be transliterated, the source language is always Belarusian.

At the same time, the English versions of the websites of Belarus‘ public bodies (ranging from the President and ministries to regional and local authorities), state-run media (the telegraph agency BelTA and the official website of the Republic of Belarus designed and supported by it), as well as numerous private companies in the vast majority of cases, disregard the provisions of these transliteration systems and romanize both geographical and personal names from Russian. In other words, these public bodies and private companies massively neglect the provisions of the domestic regulations on the transliteration of geographical and personal names.

Sometimes this ignorance leads to quite absurd situations. For instance, during the games of FC BATE Barysaŭ[23] in the 2014-15 UEFA Champions League group stage games, the discrepancy between the players‘ names on players‘ shirts and on television titles could be observed. Allegedly, the names on the shirts were written as they appear in the players‘ passports whereas the television titles were transliterated from Russian without prior consultation with the correct version of the romanized names of the BATE players. From the formal point of view, this discrepancy can be seen as if designating two distinct persons and not one individual whose name has been transliterated in two different manners. In all cases, this approach violates the existing standards and norms of transliteration.

There are three aspects which can be seen as the reasons for such situations:

1. The state failed to maintain an effective mechanism for the implementation of its own provisions on romanization of the Belarusian geographical and personal names. In other words, it is not clear to what extent the responsible persons at both public bodies and private companies (including translation agencies) are aware of these provisions and of the scope of their applications.
2. The general view on the romanization issues is often erroneously linked with Art. 17 of the Constitution which establishes Belarusian and Russian as being the two official languages in Belarus. However, the issue of romanization of both geographical and personal names belongs to the thematic legislation which establishes a hierarchy between these two languages and specifies how they should be used.

3. Consequently, the state failed to maintain an effective control mechanism which could warn and, if necessary, take to task those who breach the regulations on romanization of geographical and personal names.

As David Marples underlines, the more people make this a habit, the more prestigious the place of the indigenous language will be in Belarus, which "[would] lead to more respect for the emergent nation".[24] However, it is the state which must take additional measures in order to effectively implement and control its language-related policies. The issue of romanization is very important here, as it visibly demonstrates the country's distinctiveness to the rest of the world. Moreover, it is important to effectively promote it abroad, so that the authors who write on Belarus-related topics would base their choice on the regulations officially applicable in Belarus and not on their personal choices and/or alleged familiarity of their prospective readers.

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[23] The form "Borisov" publicly used by this football club is an example of the violation of the Belarusian regulations on the transliteration of geographical names.

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